Chasing Stars

The Rating Game Book Two

By Em Green and Sean O'Leary

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Prologue: The Stars We Chase

Perfection was never the goal. The illusion of it was.

A five-star rating had become the currency of survival.

In publishing. In art. In life.

And those who chased it—authors, executives, marketers, power players—had spent years building their careers on the numbers.

But numbers could be bought. Manipulated. Controlled.

And when a single truth shattered the industry's carefully crafted illusion, it didn't just expose the game.

It changed everything.

The Players in the New Reality

Elizabeth Harper | The Author Who Refused to Disappear

She had spoken the truth—and for that, she had been erased. But now? She was back. And she was about to learn that survival after exposure was even harder than being buried in the first place.

J.R. Wolfe | The Writer Who Sold His Soul

He had given the industry everything. Let them shape him, control him—until he couldn't recognize himself anymore. And when he finally turned on them? He had nothing left. But maybe, just maybe, he still had one last story to tell.

Veronica Westcott | The Queen Who Would Not Fall

She had a hand at reinforcing the waves across the system. And whenever it glitched, she had

watched, waited, adapted. Because the ones who truly held power in publishing weren't the authors. They were the ones who could rewrite the rules in their favor—over and over again.

Sebastián Locke | The Man Who Gamed the System The real game had never been about books. It had been about power. Influence. Control. And Sebastián Locke wasn't in the business of storytelling—he was in the business of deciding who mattered.

Vivian Sinclair | The Gatekeeper Who Chose Survival Over Morality
She had spent years inside a fickle industry, watching it struggle to keep up with trends and technology. She had seen what happened to those who refused to evolve. And she had no intention of becoming irrelevant.

Julian Raines | The Writer Born Untouchable
While others fought for recognition, Julian had

never had to. He was an insider before he had even written his first book. And yet, even he could see that the landscape was shifting. The question was—could he hold onto his throne?

Simone Vaugn | The Reclusive Genius No One Could Touch

She had spent years avoiding the noise, the system, the politics. She had built her career on exclusivity, mystery, the myth of artistic brilliance. But even she wasn't immune to what was coming.

Spencer Winslow & Everett Austin | The Architects of Visibility

They didn't write books—they sold them. Marketing executives who understood that perception was everything, and if you could control what people believed about a book… you could control who rose and who fell.

The New Game

The industry had changed.

The rating system was still king, but its flaws had been exposed.

Now, every author, every publisher, every industry player had to make a choice:

Adapt. Fight. Or be forgotten.

And in a world where perception mattered more than reality, there was only one rule left that mattered.

You don’t have to be the best. You just have to be seen.

Chapter 1: The Price of Being Seen

Liz had thought exposing the system would bring her freedom.

Instead, it had made her a target.

She had spent months fighting her way back—watching her book get pulled, reinstated, shadowbanned, praised, and condemned.

She was no longer just an author.

She was a symbol.

And that terrified the people who still wanted control.

Liz sat at the edge of a crowded publishing event, the air thick with faux literary charm and carefully curated conversations.

She had been invited—not because they wanted her there, but because keeping her close was safer than leaving her unchecked.

She’d become more accustomed to the places and people within the circles she entered.

Across the room, she spotted J.R. Wolfe, deep in conversation with a group of industry veterans. He looked calm, collected—like he belonged.

Liz thought differently.

J.R. had burned just as many bridges as she had.

The difference?

He had once been part of their world.

Liz never had been. But she wasn’t going to doubt herself anymore.

A voice cut through her thoughts.

“Still an outcast, I see.”

Liz turned.

Veronica Westcott.

The woman who had tried to bury her.

The woman who had failed.

Liz forced a smile. “Still pretending you run everything, I see.”

Veronica smirked, sipping her wine. “Pretending?” She leaned in. “Liz, darling, I practically own this industry. You’re just a temporary inconvenience.”

Liz’s chest tightened, but she refused to let Veronica see her crack.

“Funny,” Liz mused. “I thought the industry was changing, for the better.”

Veronica’s expression didn’t shift. “The industry changes, Liz. But power? That stays exactly where it’s always been. It’s always better.”

Before Liz could respond, another voice joined them.

Sebastián Locke.

She hadn’t seen him approach, but that was Sebastián’s way. Always watching. Always waiting.

“Liz,” he said smoothly, his presence alone enough to make her skin crawl. “Enjoying the event?”

Liz’s fists clenched at her sides.

She knew what this was.

A reminder.

That even though she had exposed them, they were still standing.

Sebastián took a slow sip of his drink. “Careful, Liz. The spotlight isn’t as kind as it looks.”

Liz forced herself to hold his gaze.

“I’m not afraid of the spotlight,” she said.

Sebastián smiled. Like he already knew how this would end.

“Good,” he murmured. “Then let’s see how long you last in it.”

Liz’s stomach tightened.

Because she knew exactly what he meant.

J.R. had spent the last six months rebuilding himself.

Not as an industry darling.

Not as a publishing rebel.

But as something real.

The problem?

No one knew what to do with him anymore.

The publishers wouldn’t touch him. The literary world admired his stance, but not enough to take a risk on him.

And now, standing in a room full of people who used to respect him, he felt more like a ghost than a man.

A familiar voice pulled him from his thoughts.

“J.R. Wolfe.”

He turned, meeting the unreadable gaze of Vivian Sinclair.

A woman who had been in publishing long before any of them.

J.R. lifted a brow. “Vivian.”

She studied him for a moment, then took a sip of her drink. “Are you done pretending you don’t need the machine?”

J.R. smirked. “Are you done pretending the machine isn’t broken?”

Vivian chuckled, shaking her head. “The system isn’t broken, J.R. You just realized too late that you were never meant to be on top of it.”

J.R.’s jaw tightened.

Vivian leaned in. “You think you changed something with your exposé, don’t you?”

J.R. stayed silent.

Vivian smiled. “You didn’t. You just forced the industry to find a new way to control the same game.”

J.R. clenched his fists.

Because deep down, he knew she wasn’t wrong.

Not everyone in publishing was fighting for survival.

Some had never needed to.

Julian Raines sat at a private booth, watching the event with the detached amusement of a man who had never feared the system.

His books would always sell. His name would always carry weight.

Because unlike Liz, J.R., or the others—Julian had never needed ratings. His family of writers and publishers saw to that.

He was legacy publishing at its finest.

Across from him, Simone Vaugn stirred her drink, expression unreadable.

She had never cared for these events.

She had never chased the spotlight. The spotlight chased her.

The attention became excruciating, she preferred video interviews from the safety of her high priced apartment.

The system was going through it, she had watched it change.

“You’re thinking something,” Julian mused.

Simone looked at him. “The industry isn’t dying.”

Julian smirked. “Of course not.”

Simone took a slow sip. “It’s just evolving. And people like Liz and J.R.? They think they’re leading the change I suppose.”

Julian chuckled. “And?”

Simone set her drink down, eyes sharp.

“They have no idea who’s actually controlling it.”

Julian hummed, intrigued.

Because if there was one thing they both knew?

The people fighting for survival never realized that the ones who truly controlled the game never had to fight at all.

Spencer Winslow and Everett Austin stood near the back of the event, watching the room like strategists preparing for war.

They were marketers. Brand architects. The ones who actually made books matter.

And what they saw now?

A power shift.

“Veronica is adjusting,” Spencer murmured, sipping his whiskey. “She won’t go down easily.”

Everett nodded. “Sebastián is already cleaning up the mess from J.R.’s whistle-blower tactics.”

Spencer exhaled. “And J.R. and Elizabeth Harper?”

Everett smirked. “They’re still playing checkers. Meanwhile, we’re out here rewriting the rules of chess.”

Spencer grinned.

Because that?

That was the truth.

Chapter 2: The Lines We Choose To Cross

Liz had spent years chasing success.

Now, she was running from irrelevance.

She sat in front of her laptop, scrolling through her book’s sales rankings.

The numbers were better than before, but not enough.

Not enough to secure a career.
Not enough to prove that telling the truth had been worth it.

Her inbox was full of reader messages, small indie publishers reaching out, journalists wanting more interviews.

But no big deals.
No major publishers taking a risk on her.

She had been branded as dangerous.

A whistleblower. A rebel.

And while readers loved the drama, did the industry? Absolutely not.

It was closing its doors.

A message popped up on her screen.

J.R. Wolfe: “We need to talk. Now.”

Liz sighed.

Because she already knew what he was going to say.

They had exposed the system.

But now?

They had to survive it.

J.R. had spent the last week watching publishers distance themselves from him.

His name wasn't just controversial.

It was risky.

He had tried reaching out to small publishers, agents, even self-publishing collectives.

No one would touch him.

Not because they didn't believe in him.

But because they were afraid of what supporting him might cost them.

And that?

That was the part that hurt the most.

Because he had always believed that if you were talented enough, honest enough, if you worked hard enough—there would be a place for you.

Now, he wasn't sure anymore.

His phone buzzed.

Vivian Sinclair: "We need to talk."

J.R. froze.

Vivian. Publishing's ultimate survivor.

If she was reaching out?

It meant something was happening.

And he needed to find out what.

Veronica was tired.

Not that she would ever admit it.

She had spent the last six months rebuilding, pivoting, ensuring her place in the industry didn’t slip.

And yet?

She could feel the pressure.

The landscape was changing.

Readers were starting to question things they had never questioned before.

Authors were no longer content to follow the rules.

And power?

Power was never permanent.

She sat in her office, scrolling through market trends, industry reports, reader sentiment analysis.

If she wanted to stay in control, she needed to understand what was coming next.

Her assistant knocked on the door.

“Ms. Westcott? Sebastián Locke is on line one.”

Veronica took a slow breath.

Sebastián.

She had maneuvered successfully through this industry beside him.

And now?

She wasn’t sure if she could trust him anymore.

She picked up the phone.

“Sebastián,” she said smoothly. “What can I do for you?”

His voice was calm, measured.

“It’s not what you can do for me, Veronica.” A pause. “It’s what we can do for each other.”

Veronica leaned back in her chair, staring at the ceiling.

Because she knew what this meant.

Sebastián was worried.

And if Sebastián was worried, that meant things were about to get very, very interesting.

Julian sat in his private home office, a glass of whiskey in hand.

He had been watching everything unfold.

The industry's shift. The rebellion. The collapse of certainty.

And yet?

None of it had touched him.

His books were still selling.
His family name was still respected.
His career was still safe.

But he wasn’t ignorant.

He knew that even the most privileged authors weren’t immune to change.

Across the city, Simone Vaugn sat in her dimly lit apartment, typing furiously on her favorite typewriter.

She had never engaged in the industry wars.

She had built her career on mystery, exclusivity, and talent.

But she wasn’t blind.

She could feel the shift in the air.

And the thing about shifts?

They didn’t always favor the ones who had once been untouchable.

Spencer and Everett were not authors.

They were the people who decided which authors mattered.

And right now?

They were redefining everything.

Everett sat in a conference room, watching data scroll across the screen.

“The old way is dead,” he said simply.

Spencer nodded. “The new system isn’t built on just stars and reviews anymore. It’s built on popularity and perception.”

Everett smirked. “And the best part?”

Spencer raised an eyebrow.

Everett leaned forward.

“We’re the ones who get to decide what that perception is.”

Spencer grinned.

Because that?

That was true power.

Chapter 3: The Desperation Of Relevance

Liz needed a plan.

She had been watching the sales trickle in, the engagement fluctuate, the industry hesitate to embrace her again.

She wasn't a failure.

But she wasn't winning either.

J.R. had called her that morning with a frustrated rant about the industry's refusal to acknowledge their success.

But she already knew why.

Because publishing wasn't just about numbers, or truth, or even quality.

It was about narratives.

And right now?

Hers was uncertain.

She had gone from underdog to whistleblower to survivor.

Now, the industry was waiting to see what she would do next.

And the terrifying thing?

She wasn’t sure what the right move was.

A knock at the door pulled her from her thoughts.

She frowned. She wasn’t expecting anyone.

When she opened it, Veronica Westcott stood on the other side.

Liz’s stomach dropped.

Veronica smiled, smooth as ever.

“Let’s talk, Liz.”

Liz swallowed. “About what?”

Veronica’s smile didn’t waver.

“About how you and I aren’t so different.”

Wait… *what*?

J.R. hadn’t set foot in a traditional publishing office since the fallout.

But here he was.

Sitting across from Vivian Sinclair, a woman who had once been one of his biggest supporters—before she had watched him implode.

Vivian studied him over the rim of her coffee cup.

“You know,” she said, voice casual, “you’re still a damn good writer.”

J.R. sighed. “Is that why you called me here?”

Vivian tilted her head. “No. I called you here because the industry is shifting, and I think you know that as well as I do.”

J.R. frowned. “Shifting how?”

Vivian set her cup down, folding her hands on the table.

“The traditional model? It’s dying. The five-star system? Everyone sees it for what it is now. But that doesn’t mean publishing is going away. It’s just… restructuring.”

J.R.narrowed his eyes. “And where do I fit into that?”

Vivian’s smile was unreadable.

“That depends,” she said. “Are you done burning bridges, or do you still want to have a career?”

J.R.’s jaw tightened.

Because of the way she said it.

It felt less like an offer and more like a warning.

Veronica stepped into Liz’s apartment like she already owned the space.

Liz didn’t invite her to sit, but Veronica did anyway.

She crossed her legs, folded her hands, and smiled.

“You and I,” she said smoothly, “have been circling each other for a long time.”

Liz leaned against the counter, arms crossed. “I don’t see it that way. I see it as you living out your Mrs. Danvers' obsession in real time, every time you see me.”

Veronica’s smirk deepened. “Of course you don’t. You still think we’re on opposite sides.”

Liz’s stomach tightened.

Because Veronica wasn’t just here to gloat.

She was here to play a new game.

Liz exhaled sharply. “What do you want Nurse Ratchett?”

Veronica’s eyes smouldered for a second and then she tilted her head. “My, my, my Liz. You’ve come a ways haven’t you. Well I want the same thing you do, Liz.”

Liz’s fists curled at her sides.

“You want me to say it?” Veronica mused. “Fine. I want power. Influence. Relevance. Just like you.”

Liz’s skin went cold.

Because the worst part?

Veronica wasn’t wrong.

Liz did want those things.

But she wasn’t willing to destroy people to get them.

Veronica sighed, standing.

“I’m not here to fight you, Liz,” she said, brushing nonexistent dust off her sleeve. “I’m here to tell you the truth.”

Liz forced herself to hold her gaze.

“And what’s that?”

Veronica’s smile sharpened.

“You don’t win this industry by exposing it.” She took a slow step forward. “You win by learning how to control it.”

Liz didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

Because deep down?

A small, terrifying part of her thought and felt Veronica was right.

Sebastián watched the publishing world shift with the same detached amusement he always had.

Liz and J.R. had tried to break the system.

Veronica was trying to rebuild it, with enough back doors for herself.

And he?

He was watching for the next opportunity.

Because power didn’t belong to authors or editors or critics.

It belonged to the ones who understood how to shape perception and sell a story.

And right now?

The next version of publishing was being written.

The only question was:

Who would be holding the stylus?

Chapter 4: The Devil's Bargain

Liz hadn't slept.

Veronica's words had clung to her like a poison.

"You don't win this industry by exposing it. You win by learning how to control it."

She hated that Veronica had even planted the thought.

Because the truth?

Liz wasn't sure what her next move was.

She had fought so hard to break the system, but now, she was adrift.

No major publishers wanted to work with her. No mainstream platform wanted to risk their reputation on her.
Her book was selling, but not enough to make a real living from it. And she was being kept out of every major industry space. She'll have to go back to part-time work yet again.

Which meant Veronica wasn't wrong.

Liz needed to be part of the system if she ever wanted to actually change it. And to change her circumstances.

And that was a terrifying realization.

Her phone buzzed.

> Veronica Westcott: "Have you thought about my offer?"

Liz hesitated.

Then, after a long breath, she typed a response.

“Meet me for coffee. Tomorrow. Noon.”

If she was going to turn Veronica down, she wanted to look her in the eyes when she did.

Or at least, that’s what she told herself.

J.R. was officially untouchable.

The major publishers had blacklisted him.
The indie houses were too afraid to work with him.
And his book sales, which had spiked after his rebellion, were now flatlining.

Which meant he had two choices.

- Disappear from the industry entirely.
- Find a way back in.

Which was why he was currently sitting in Vivian Sinclair’s office, listening to her offer.

Vivian, who had survived every shift in publishing.
Vivian, who had never let morality get in the way of longevity.

She folded her hands on her desk, watching him with mild amusement.

“You’re not a fool, J.R.,” she said. “You know exactly how this business works.”

J.R. exhaled sharply. “And what? You want to help me get back in?”

Vivian smirked. “I want to help you evolve.”

J.R. leaned forward. “What’s the catch?”

Vivian tilted her head. “No catch. Just an understanding.”

J.R. waited.

Vivian’s voice dropped just slightly.

“If you want to be part of this industry again,” she said, “you need to play the game the right way.”

J.R. felt a cold weight settle in his stomach.

Because he already knew what she meant.

He just wasn’t sure if he was willing to do it.

Veronica read Liz’s message twice.

Then, slowly, she smiled.

Liz had agreed to meet.

Which meant she was thinking about it.

And that?

That was the first step.

Because Veronica wasn’t in the business of making lifelong enemies.

She was in the business of making people realize they never had a choice to begin with.

And Liz?

Liz was closer than ever to understanding that.

Sebastián watched the industry move like a grand chessboard.

Liz was considering Veronica's offer.

J.R. was on the verge of caving to Vivian.

And the best part?

Neither of them realized they had already lost.

Because power wasn't in the hands of authors.

It was in the hands of the ones who decided which stories mattered.

Sebastián took a slow sip of his drink, watching the pieces fall into place.

Soon, the industry would find balance again.

And he?

He would still be the one holding the reins.

Chapter 5: Coffee With The Enemy

Liz arrived at the café five minutes early.

She wasn't nervous.

At least, that's what she told herself.

She ordered plain black coffee—no distractions, no unnecessary indulgences—then sat at a table near the window. A clear escape route, if needed.

Veronica arrived exactly on time.

Not a second early. Not a second late.

Because Veronica controlled every interaction, even the unspoken ones.

She slid into the seat across from Liz with the grace of someone who always belonged.

Liz hated that.

Veronica set her designer bag down, smoothed the sleeve of her silk blouse, and then—only then—lifted her gaze to Liz.

“You considered my offer.”

Liz stiffened.

“I considered meeting you,” she corrected.

Veronica’s lips twitched in amusement. “Same thing.”

Liz’s fists clenched beneath the table.

“Why me?” she asked, cutting through the pleasantries.

Veronica tilted her head. “Because you’re already one of us. You just don’t know it yet.”

Liz’s stomach twisted. “I’m nothing like you.”

Veronica sighed. “Really? You want success. You want influence. You want to be seen, to be

heard. To matter." She leaned in slightly. "That's all I've ever wanted too."

Liz opened her mouth to argue—then hesitated.

Because Veronica wasn't wrong.

Veronica sipped her coffee. "You're running out of options, Liz. The system isn't built for people who fight it. But if you work with me?" Her eyes gleamed. "We can rewrite the rules."

Liz's breath hitched.

Veronica leaned back, giving her space to absorb it.

"Think about it," she murmured, standing and placing a crisp business card on the table. "When you're ready to stop losing, call me."

And then, she walked away—leaving Liz with the one thing she feared most.

A choice.

J.R. sat in Vivian Sinclair’s office, feeling the weight of his own irrelevance.

He was a writer without a home.

A name publishers whispered about but refused to touch.

Vivian leaned forward, sharp and unreadable.

“The industry is adjusting, J.R. You can either adjust with it or you can fade away.”

J.R. forced a bitter laugh. “And let me guess—you have a way to bring me back?”

Vivian smiled. A shark’s smile.

“You know I do.”

She slid a contract across the desk.

J.R. eyed it like it was a loaded gun.

“Your book gets published. You get full industry support. You rebuild your career.”

J.R. swallowed hard. “And in return?”

Vivian’s voice was soft. Dangerous.

“You play by the rules.”

J.R. exhaled sharply, staring at the papers in front of him.

One signature.

That’s all it would take.

One pen stroke, and he’d be part of the machine again.

But could he live with that?

His hand hovered over the pen.

The weight of his entire career balanced on the tip of his fingers.

And then…

He picked it up.

Veronica stepped into Sebastián's office, dropping into the leather chair across from him.

"She's close," Veronica said. "I can feel it."

Sebastián swirled the whiskey in his glass, studying her. "And Wolfe?"

Veronica smirked. "Vivian has him handled."

Sebastián nodded slowly, setting his glass down. "Then we're back in control."

Veronica met his gaze, unblinking.

"We never lost control," she murmured. "We just let them believe they had a choice."

Sebastián's lips curled in approval.

Chapter 6: The Ones Left Behind

Nathaniel Mercer had watched the publishing industry implode from the sidelines.

Unlike Liz or J.R., he hadn't been part of the scandal, the rebellion, or the headlines.

But he had felt the consequences just the same.

He had been self-publishing for years, a sci-fi writer trying to break into the mainstream, desperate for recognition.

And now?

His books were buried.

Not because they weren't good.

But because the algorithm had changed again.

The industry was shifting—publishing houses were scrambling, review platforms were

recalibrating, marketing teams were rewriting strategies.

And indie authors like him?

They were collateral damage.

Nate scrolled through his latest sales report.

Flatline.

If something didn't change soon, he wouldn't just be invisible.

He'd be done.

His phone buzzed.

> Harper Keane: "Meet me tonight. 9PM. We need to talk."

Nate hesitated.

Harper. A marketing strategist who understood the system better than anyone.

She wouldn't reach out unless she had a plan.

And right now?

He needed one.

Harper wasn’t naïve.

She knew publishing was a business.

And right now, that business was bleeding.

The five-star system had lost credibility.

Readers were distrustful.
Authors were more desperate than ever.
And marketing teams?

They were scrambling to figure out what would replace it.

Harper had built her career on manipulating the system.

She had boosted books, buried others, crafted images that made unknown authors into bestsellers.

But now, for the first time…

She didn’t know what came next.

That’s why she had reached out to Nathaniel.

Because if self-publishing was going to survive, it needed a new strategy.

And if Nathaniel was smart?

He’d be part of it.

Derek Sloan still believed in literary prestige.

He had spent years working at one of the Big Five, ensuring that books with real depth—not just commercial appeal—found their audience.

But that audience?

It was shrinking.

J.R. Wolfe’s rebellion had shaken the foundation of traditional publishing.

And now?

Executives were panicking.

Derek had been called into too many emergency meetings, listening to higher-ups argue about how to restore trust in the system.

But they weren't trying to fix the problem.

They were trying to control it.

And if he wanted to stay relevant, he had to decide where he stood.

His phone buzzed.

> Elias Kai: "Meet me tomorrow. We need to discuss what happens next."

Derek exhaled slowly.

Elias was one of the last editors who still cared about literary fiction.

If he was reaching out?

That meant something big was about to happen.

Elias Kai sat in his office, surrounded by manuscripts that would never sell.

Books that were beautiful, brilliant, literary masterpieces—but not algorithm-friendly.

And he was tired.

He had spent his entire career fighting for books that mattered.

But publishing didn’t care about that anymore.

It cared about clicks, controversy, and perception.

The five-star system had been flawed, yes.

But at least it had given books a fighting chance.

Now?

Everything was chaos.

Sebastián tapped his pen against the desk.

He needed a new strategy.

And if Derek Sloan was smart, he'd help him find one.

Lena Cho had seen it coming.

She worked in sales and distribution, which meant she knew before anyone else what was really happening in bookstores.

And right now?

Bookstores were struggling.

Customers didn't trust reviews anymore.

They didn't know what to buy.

And that?

That was dangerous.

Because if readers lost faith in books, the industry wouldn't recover.

Lena flipped through her latest reports.

Sales were plummeting.

If she didn't find a way to rebuild trust, the entire industry would collapse.

And she refused to let that happen.

Simone hadn't left her apartment in weeks.

She had spent her entire career avoiding the spotlight.

But now?

It felt like the spotlight had abandoned her.

Her books—once hailed as literary brilliance — were being forgotten.

Because she had never engaged.

Never played the game. The movie and books sales were enough that she didn't need to venture out too far.

And now, she wasn't sure if she had a place anymore anyway.

Her assistant knocked on her door.

"Ms. Vaugn? You have a call from Julian Raines."

Simone froze.

Julian.

A man who had never had to fight for success.

If he was calling?

It meant something was shifting.

And Simone wasn't sure if she was ready for it.

Julian had never worried about ratings.

He had family connections.
He had family wealth.
He had privilege and prestige.

But even he could feel the industry changing.

For the first time in his career...

He was wondering if his success had an expiration date.

And if it did?

He needed to prepare.

That's why he was calling Simone.

Because if she was feeling the shift, then it was real.

And he needed to know how to stay on top.

Spencer and Everett stood in a private boardroom, reviewing the latest industry data.

“The five-star system is practically dead,” Everett said.

Spencer nodded. “We need something new.”

Everett smirked. “We’re already building it.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Everett leaned forward.

“We’re going to control the next phase of publishing before anyone even realizes it’s happening.”

Spencer grinned.

Because that?

That was exactly what they did best.

Chapter 7: The New Game Begins

Liz sat in her apartment, Veronica Westcott's business card still on the table.

It felt like a loaded weapon.

She had spent months fighting the system, exposing the truth, refusing to play the game.

But now?

She was simply running out of realistic options.

Her book sales had stalled.
Her name was still radioactive.
And every door she knocked on? Still closed.

If she wanted to survive, she had two choices:

- Keep fighting. Stay independent. Risk irrelevance.
- Step back into the system. Play by new rules. Work with Veronica.

Her phone buzzed.

Nathaniel Mercer: “I need to talk. Now.”

Liz frowned.

She hadn’t spoken to Nate in months.

But if he was reaching out now?

It meant he was struggling too.

And that meant she wasn’t alone in this.

Maybe, just maybe…

They could find a way to fight back together.

Nate met Liz at a small café, one of the few places that still felt real.

No industry politics.
No manufactured success.
Just people trying to create something that mattered.

Liz slid into the seat across from him, studying his expression.

“You look like hell,” she said.

Nate smirked. “That’s because I’m living in it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Let me guess. Sales are tanking?”

He exhaled. “Worse. The industry’s shifting, and I can’t keep up. Algorithms aren’t favoring indie books anymore. No publisher will touch me. And readers?” He let out a bitter laugh. “They don’t trust anything.”

Liz knew the feeling.

She stirred her coffee, debating whether to tell him about Veronica’s offer.

But before she could decide, Nate leaned forward.

“I have an idea,” he said.

Liz frowned. “An idea for what?”

Nate’s eyes burned with determination.

“For how we take back control.”

J.R. stared at the contract from Vivian Sinclair.

It was clean, simple, life-changing.

Sign it, and he’d be back in the industry.

A new book deal. Full publisher support.

Everything he had lost… returned.

Except, it wasn’t his book.

It was a product. A perfectly engineered novel designed to fit the new market.

His story had been rewritten, reshaped, optimized for success.

All he had to do was say yes.

J.R. clenched his jaw.

Because for the first time in his life, he wasn't sure what mattered more.

His career?

Or his soul?

Veronica sat across from Sebastián in a private, upscale restaurant.

He had always been one of the few people in publishing she felt she could work with.

Well, unlike most.

He understood what really mattered.

Sebastián took a slow sip of wine. "You've been busy."

Veronica smirked. "And you've been watching."

Elias set his glass down. “Tell me, Veronica. How do you see this ending?”

Veronica exhaled slowly. “The industry is shifting. Liz and J.R. think they broke the system.”

Sebastián raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t they?”

Veronica chuckled. “No, Sebastián. They just created a power vacuum. And now? Someone else will fill it.”

Elias studied her. “And you think that someone should be you?”

Veronica met his gaze, unflinching.

“I think it already is.”

Sebastián tapped his fingers against the table.

“You’re bold,” he admitted. “But boldness isn’t enough.”

Veronica leaned forward, voice steady.

“I don’t need boldness. I need control. And I intend to have it.”

Sebastián smirked. “Then let’s talk about how we make that happen.”

Lena sat in Derek Sloan’s office, arms crossed.

“You realize what’s happening, right?” she said.

Derek sighed. “You’re going to tell me anyway.”

Lena threw a report onto his desk.

“Indie bookstores are collapsing. Distribution models are failing. Readers don’t know what to trust anymore.”

Derek glanced at the numbers. It was bad.

And Lena wasn’t exaggerating.

“We need a new model,” Lena said. “Something that rebuilds trust with readers.”

Derek ran a hand through his hair.

“You have an idea?”

Lena smirked.

“I have a revolution.”

Spencer Winslow tapped his fingers against his desk, watching the data scroll across the screen.

Everett Austin leaned against the wall, smirking.

“Are we ready?” Spencer asked.

Everett’s smirk widened.

“We’re always ready.”

Spencer exhaled slowly.

“The five-star system is changed.”

Everett nodded. “Which means we get to create something new.”

Spencer looked at him.

“And control it.”

Everett grinned.

“Exactly.”

Chapter 8: The Rebuilding Rebellion Begins

Liz sat across from Nate in a dimly lit café, her citrus tea untouched.

Nate had just laid out his idea.

It was bold. Risky. Probably impossible.

But for the first time in months, she felt something she hadn't felt since the industry turned on her.

Hope.

Nate leaned forward, eyes burning with determination.

"We don't need their system, Liz. We build our own."

Liz exhaled, rubbing her temples. "Do you have any idea how hard that would be?"

Nate smirked. “Since when has ‘hard’ ever stopped us?”

Liz hesitated.

Because he was right.

She had spent so long fighting the system, waiting for the industry to change.

But what if it never would?

What if the only way to win was to start over?

Liz met Nate’s gaze.

“I’m in.”

Nate grinned.

“Then let’s shut it down for permanent repair.”

J.R. stared at the contract.

He had been staring at it for three days.

One signature, and he was back in the game.

A book deal. Industry support. A career again.

But at what cost?

Because this book wasn’t his.

It had been shaped, optimized, manufactured for success.

It would sell.

It would win awards.

And he would hate every word of it.

Vivian Sinclair had told him he needed to play the game.

But if he signed?

He wasn’t just playing.

He was giving up.

His phone buzzed.

Elizabeth Harper: “I have something you need to hear.”

J.R. hesitated.

Then, slowly, he set the pen down.

And decided not to sign.

Not yet.

Veronica poured herself a glass of wine, watching Elias Kai read through her proposal.

He had been silent for too long.

Which meant he was either impressed or about to rip it apart.

Finally, he set the pages down, fingers steepled.

“This is ambitious.”

Veronica smirked. “I don’t do small.”

Elias exhaled. “If we do this, we aren’t just adapting.” He looked at her. “We’re replacing the old system entirely.”

Veronica’s smile widened.

“Exactly.”

Elias tapped the papers. “And you’re sure you can control it?”

Veronica leaned back, completely at ease.

“I always control it.”

Elias studied her for a long moment.

Then, slowly, he nodded.

“Then let’s begin.”

Lena shoved another sales report at Derek.

He barely looked at it.

“I get it,” he said, sighing. “Bookstores are struggling.”

Lena crossed her arms. “You don’t get it, Derek. We’re on the edge of collapse.”

Derek rubbed his face. “So what’s your solution?”

Lena leaned forward, fire in her eyes.

“We take back distribution.”

Derek frowned. “What does that even mean?”

Lena smirked.

“It means we stop letting publishers and algorithms decide what people read.”

Derek stared at her.

Because if she was serious?

She was about to get a lot of people furious.

Spencer watched as Everett loaded up the new analytics system.

“This is it,” Everett said, typing rapidly. “The answer to the chaos.”

Spencer leaned forward. “Show me.”

Everett clicked a button.

And on the screen?

A new rating system.

Built not on stars, reviews, or critic scores.

But on reader engagement, discussion trends, and predictive analysis.

Spencer exhaled.

“This is genius.”

Everett grinned.

“This is the future.”

Chapter 9: The First Move

Liz and Nate stood in front of a single camera, in a borrowed office space, with nothing but an idea.

No publisher backing.
No industry safety net.
No guarantees.

But that had never stopped them before.

Nate adjusted the mic. “You ready for this?”

Liz exhaled. “Not even a little.”

Nate grinned. “Perfect.”

The livestream started.

Liz took a deep breath, then spoke directly to the readers.

> “The publishing industry is broken. You know it. We know it. And for too long, authors have been forced to play by rules

designed to benefit everyone but the writers and the readers."

Nate leaned in.

"We're done waiting for the system to change. We're building something new. A platform where books succeed because readers want them to, not because algorithms dictate it."

Liz held Nate's gaze. Then, together, they announced their plan.

"This is for the writers who were told they weren't marketable. For the readers who have been manipulated by fake reviews. For the bookstores fighting to survive. This is the beginning of something different."

They had no idea if it would work.

But as the viewer count skyrocketed, and messages flooded in, one thing became clear.

They weren’t alone.

J.R. sat in his apartment, staring at the contract he hadn’t signed.

Vivian Sinclair had given him one more day to decide.

His phone buzzed.

Elizabeth Harper: “Check your inbox.”

J.R. frowned and opened his email.

The livestream link.

He clicked it.

And as he listened to Liz and Nate declare war on the industry, something inside him shifted.

This was what he had been waiting for.

A chance to fight for something real.

He picked up the contract.

Then, in one swift motion, he ripped it in half.

And for the first time in months, he felt free.

Veronica's phone wouldn't stop ringing.

Her assistant rushed in. "Elizabeth and Nathaniel's livestream has over 200,000 views in the first hour."

Veronica didn't even blink.

She simply picked up her phone and dialed Sebastián Locke.

He answered on the first ring.

"I assume you've seen the problem," Sebastián said.

Veronica swirled her wine. "It's not a problem."

Sebastián chuckled. “You sound confident.”

Veronica smirked. “Because I already know how to crush them.”

Sebastián exhaled. “What’s the plan?”

Veronica leaned back.

“We remind the world why the industry needs gatekeepers.”

Lena stared at her inbox.

Her phone was blowing up with independent bookstores reaching out.

Liz and Nate’s announcement had changed everything.

Readers were looking for alternatives to the mainstream.

And she had one.

She picked up the phone and called Derek.

He answered groggily. “Lena, it’s six in the morning.”

“We’re doing it,” she said, heart racing. “We’re taking distribution back.”

Derek groaned. “I need coffee before I commit to revolution.”

Lena grinned.

This was going to be big.

Spencer and Everett watched the livestream numbers climb.

Everett smirked. “They’re making our job easy.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “How so?”

Everett clicked a button.

On the screen, the new rating system went live.

Instead of stars, books were ranked by reader engagement, sentiment analysis, and organic discussions.

No more five-star inflation.
No more gaming the system.

Just pure reader-driven success.

And the best part?

They controlled it.

Spencer smirked. “Let’s see who wins this game.”

Chapter 10: The First Threat

Liz's heart pounded as she stared at the article on her screen.

> *INDUSTRY INSIDERS WARN: SELF-PUBLISHING REBELS SPREADING MISINFORMATION*
> *Sources claim that authors Elizabeth Harper and Nathaniel Mercer are promoting a dangerous anti-industry agenda that could mislead aspiring writers and destabilize the publishing landscape.*

The article was everywhere.

Major media outlets. Publishing blogs. Social media.

All twisting their message into something dangerous, reckless, irresponsible.

Liz clenched her fists. "Veronica."

Nate exhaled sharply. “She didn’t even wait 24 hours.”

Liz grabbed her phone. “We need to go on the offensive.”

Nate shook his head. “No. We stick to the plan. We keep proving that our platform is real, that authors can thrive without their system.”

Liz swallowed hard. “And if they shut us down before we even start?”

Nate’s jaw tightened.

“Then we make sure they regret it.”

J.R. had spent years being careful.

Saying the right things.
Avoiding controversy.
Trying to fit into their version of success.

And where had it gotten him?

Blacklisted. Forgotten.

But now?

He wasn't hiding anymore.

J.R. opened up his Substack, took a deep breath, and typed.

> "The publishing industry was built on exclusion. Elizabeth Harper and Nathaniel Mercer are fighting to change that. If that's dangerous, then maybe the system should be scared."

He hit send.

The response was immediate.

Readers flooded his mentions with support. Industry professionals either ignored him or called him reckless.
And then—his phone rang.

Sebastián Locke: “You just made a big mistake.”

J.R. smirked.

Did I?

Veronica paced her office, reading the headlines spreading across the industry.

Sebastián Locke sat across from her, arms crossed.

“They aren’t backing down,” Sebastián said.

Veronica smirked. “Neither are we.”

Sebastián sighed. “We should have shut this down before it started.”

Veronica took a sip of wine. “No, Sebastián. We let them get just far enough to expose their weaknesses.”

Sebastián exhaled. “And now?”

Veronica’s eyes gleamed.

“Now, we hit them where it hurts.”

Sebastián leaned forward. “Which is?”

Veronica tossed a confidential file onto the table.

“Lena Cho is trying to break distribution. Derek Sloan is helping her. If they succeed, bookstores will follow.”

Sebastián frowned. “And?”

Veronica smirked.

“And we make sure they don’t.”

Lena and Derek sat in a backroom meeting with independent bookstore owners.

“The five-star system is not able to help us, the bookstores, when there’s manipulation going on,” Lena said, flipping through sales reports.

“It was taken over to benefit those publishers and marketing executives who wanted to control it for profit and power.”

Derek nodded. “Elizabeth and Nathaniel’s working toward giving us leverage. We can use this to roll back some of the crazy control so that we can make better choices for ourselves and our bookstores.”

One of the bookstore owners hesitated. “And if the manipulators fights back?”

Lena’s jaw tightened.

“They already are. But if we don’t do this now, small bookstores not only will dry out and disappear, the only choices left will be big bookstore chains, offering the same stuff everywhere? My Twitty Quirky Corner will no longer be. And you Zack, your Knitting Nook for Knights will be gone. ”

She exhaled.

“Then independent bookstores won’t survive the next decade.”

Silence.

Then, one by one, the bookstore owners nodded.

They were in.

Simone sat in her dark apartment, watching the war unfold from the safety of her self-imposed exile.

Her books were still considered masterpieces. The first three became global hits within a year of releasing.

Being a homebody, meant no drama, no scandals.

She didn’t make many friends but she didn’t make any enemies. Her reputation was intact.

And yet…

She wasn’t immune.

The new system being built didn’t favor authors like her—the literary geniuses who refused to play the game.

A knock at her door startled her.

She hesitated before opening it.

Julian Raines stood there, perfectly put together as always.

“Simone,” he said smoothly. “You’ve been quiet.”

Simone crossed her arms. “I prefer it that way.”

Julian chuckled. “That’s the problem.”

She frowned. “What do you want, Julian?”

His smile faded.

“To warn you. If you don’t take control of your career now, you won’t have one left.”

Simone’s stomach twisted.

Because she was afraid he was right. This new way of reaching people was different. If you didn’t socialize, if you weren’t seem across all the platforms, bookclubs and book press didn’t talk about you. If you didn’t keep generating online interest new readers wouldn’t find your books and if your books stop getting listed on every brand new popular book list, they cease to exist.

Simone wasn’t built to play ‘showman' and salesman. The idea of leaving her home, her haven, had her panicked to her core.

Spencer leaned back in his chair, watching real-time data on their new reader engagement algorithm.

Everett smirked. “It’s working.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “How well?”

Everett tapped the screen.

“Elizabeth and Nathaniel’s movement? Trending. J.R.’s public support? Skyrocketing engagement.”

Spencer smirked. “And Veronica’s counterattack?”

Everett flicked to another data set.

“Readers don’t trust the industry response. Veronica is losing ground.”

Spencer’s smirk widened.

“This is where we decide who wins.”

Everett leaned forward.

“And where we make sure it’s us.”

CHAPTER SIX REWRITE

Chapter 6: The Ones Left Behind

Liz had expected pushback.

She hadn’t expected silence.

Her book sales were stagnant.
Her agent? Gone.
Her name? A warning in publishing circles.

She had exposed the system, but the industry wasn’t fighting her.

It was ignoring her.

And that?

That was worse.

Her phone buzzed.

Nathaniel Mercer: “We need to talk. Now.”

Liz frowned.

She hadn’t spoken to Nate in months.

But if he was reaching out now?

It meant he was struggling too.

And that meant she wasn’t alone.

Maybe, just maybe…

They could find a way to fight back together.

Nathaniel had been self-publishing for years.

He had played the game. He had tried everything.

Now?

Nothing worked.

The algorithm wasn’t favoring indie books anymore.
Marketing was more expensive than ever.
And publishers?

They had no interest in authors like him.

Liz had fought against the industry and lost.

Nate had never even been part of it.

And now?

Both of them were on the outside.

He needed a plan.

Something bold.

Something that didn't just help him—but helped all the indie authors being erased.

And if Liz was smart?

She'd be part of it.

J.R. had spent his entire life trying to be part of the system.

Now?

He was watching it move on without him.

He had thought the industry needed him.

He had been wrong.

His phone buzzed.

> Clint Burnett: “Meet me tomorrow. We need to talk.”

J.R. frowned.

Clint Burnett was one of the last editors who actually cared about literary fiction.

If he was reaching out?

It meant something big was about to happen.

And J.R. needed to know what.

Veronica had seen disruptions before.

This wasn’t new.

Liz and Nathaniel thought they were starting a movement.

But she knew better.

They weren’t changing the industry.

They were creating a vacuum.

And a vacuum?

Needed to be filled.

She picked up the phone and called Sebastián Locke.

He answered on the first ring.

“I assume you’ve seen the problem,” Sebastián said.

Veronica swirled her wine. “It’s not a problem.”

Sebastián chuckled. “You sound confident.”

Veronica smirked. “Because I already know how to control it.”

Sebastián exhaled. “And how do we do that?”

Veronica’s eyes gleamed.

“We remind the world why gatekeepers exist.”

Clint Burnett had been in publishing long enough to know one thing.

The industry never really changed.

It adapted. It evolved.

But the power?

Stayed in the same hands.

And right now?

That power was starting to slip.

He had fought for literary fiction his entire career.

Now, he was watching it die.

And he had to decide:

Fight for the books that mattered?

Or accept that the future belonged to data and trends?

J.R. Wolfe had always been one of the greats.

That's why Clint had reached out.

Because if J.R. couldn't survive the system anymore…

Maybe no one could.

Lena had seen it coming.

Independent bookstores were suffering.

Readers didn't trust reviews anymore.
They didn't know what to buy.

And that?

That was dangerous.

Because if readers lost faith in books, the industry wouldn't recover.

Derek rubbed his temples. “So what’s your plan?”

Lena smirked.

“We take back distribution.”

Derek frowned. “What does that even mean?”

Lena leaned forward.

“It means we stop letting publishers and algorithms decide what people read.”

Derek stared at her.

Because if she was serious?

She was about to start a war.

Simone hadn’t left her apartment in weeks.

She had built her career on mystique.

On being untouchable.

But now?

That wasn’t enough.

Her books were still considered masterpieces.

But readers weren’t paying attention anymore.

She had ignored the system for years.

Now, she was watching it move on without her.

And she had to decide:

Step into the industry fight?

Or become a relic?

A knock at her door made her jump.

She hesitated before opening it.

Julian Raines stood there, perfectly put together as always.

“Simone,” he said smoothly. “You’ve been quiet.”

Simone crossed her arms. “I prefer it that way.”

Julian chuckled. “That’s the problem.”

She frowned. “What do you want, Julian?”

His smile faded.

“To warn you. If you don’t take control of your career now, you won’t have one left.”

Simone’s stomach twisted.

Because she knew he was right.

Spencer and Everett stood in their office, watching the new data models.

Everett smirked. “It’s working.”

Spencer raised an eyebrow. “How well?”

Everett tapped the screen.

“Elizabeth and Nathaniel’s movement? Trending. J.R.’s career? Reviving.”

Spencer smirked. “And Veronica?”

Everett flicked to another data set.

“She’s scrambling to control the narrative.”

Spencer’s smirk widened.

“This is where we decide who wins.”

Everett leaned forward.

“And where we make sure it’s us.”

Chapter 7: The First Spark

Liz and Nate sat in a tiny, overheated office, staring at a barebones website prototype on Nate's laptop.

It wasn't fancy.

It wasn't polished.

But it was the beginning of something real.

A platform for indie authors.
A place where books weren't controlled by five-star ratings, publisher deals, or corporate marketing.

A reader-driven system.

Nate tapped the screen. "This is it. The first step."

Liz exhaled, still trying to wrap her head around what they were doing.

“We’re building a system to take on the entire industry,” she murmured.

Nate smirked. “Terrifying, isn’t it?”

Liz met his gaze.

And then, for the first time in a long time…

She smiled.

J.R. sat in Clint Burnett’s office, staring at the manuscript on the desk between them.

It was his.

The book he had written before everything fell apart.

Clint leaned forward, expression unreadable.

“You want this published?”

J.R. swallowed. “Yeah.”

Clint tapped the cover. “Then we have a problem.”

J.R. frowned. “What problem?”

Clint exhaled.

“This book?” He gestured at the manuscript. “It won’t survive in today’s system.”

J.R. stiffened. “Then what do you want me to do?”

Clint studied him for a long moment.

Then, slowly, he said, “We change the system.”

J.R. blinked. “Excuse me?”

Clint smirked.

“I think it’s time publishing remembered why books mattered.”

J.R. exhaled.

Because for the first time in months, he felt like he had a chance.

Veronica leaned back in her chair, calm and composed, while Sebastián Locke scanned the latest industry reports.

He didn’t look pleased.

“They’re moving faster than expected,” Sebastián muttered.

Veronica swirled her wine. “That’s what happens when you make people desperate.”

Sebastián exhaled. “We need to shut this down before it becomes an actual threat.”

Veronica smirked.

“Oh, Sebastián.” She sipped her wine. “We don’t shut it down. We absorb it.”

Sebastián raised an eyebrow. “And how do you plan to do that?”

Veronica’s eyes gleamed.

“We let them build it. We let them think they’re winning.”

She set her glass down with a soft clink.

“And then? We take it from them.”

Sebastián chuckled.

“I do love your style, Veronica.”

She smirked.

“Of course you do.”

Lena stood in the middle of an independent bookstore, surrounded by skeptical owners.

Derek stood next to her, arms crossed.

“This is crazy,” one of the booksellers said. “We can’t just abandon the distribution networks.”

Lena met his gaze. “They abandoned us first.”

Silence.

She had them.

Lena exhaled. “Liz and Nate are fighting for indie authors. But we? We need to fight for bookstores.”

Derek finally spoke.

“If we don’t control what gets into bookstores, publishers will keep feeding us whatever sells best online.” He looked around. “And you all know what that means.”

One of the older bookstore owners sighed.

“More celebrity memoirs and algorithm-friendly thrillers.”

Lena smirked. “Exactly.”

Another long silence.

Then, slowly, the booksellers nodded.

Lena exchanged a glance with Derek.

The bookstores were in.

Simone sat in Julian Raines' penthouse, feeling like she didn't belong.

She hated socializing.

Hated industry drama.

Hated the thought of begging for relevance.

But Julian?

He had never had to beg for anything.

He handed her a glass of wine. "You've been avoiding the conversation, Simone."

She stared at the dark liquid. "Because I don't need to have it."

Julian chuckled. “Of course you do.”

He leaned forward.

“The system is shifting. You either adapt… or you fade away.”

Simone stiffened. “I refuse to sell myself to the machine.”

Julian smirked.

“Then find a way to make the machine work for you.”

Simone exhaled.

Because for the first time, she realized…

Maybe Julian wasn’t completely wrong.

Spencer watched as Everett typed rapidly, finalizing the algorithm update.

“This will be the biggest shift in publishing since the five-star system,” Everett muttered.

Spencer nodded. “And we’re the only ones who know about it.”

Everett clicked a button.

The new rating system was live.

No more five-star reviews.

Now?

Books would be ranked on predictive analysis, reader behavior, and engagement patterns.

Everett smirked. “Veronica thinks she’s in control.”

Spencer grinned. “She isn’t.”

Because for the first time in history…

Publishing was being decided by numbers, not people.

And Spencer and Everett?

They wanted to control the numbers.

Chapter 8: The First Strike

Liz and Nate stood in front of the camera, nerves tight.

This was it.

Their platform was ready.

Their message was clear.

And now?

They had to convince the world to believe in them.

Nate adjusted the mic. “Ready?”

Liz exhaled. “Not even a little.”

Nate grinned. “Perfect.”

The livestream started.

Liz faced the screen, heart pounding.

“Publishing isn’t broken—it was built this way. A system where a handful of people decide

which books succeed. A system that forces authors to play a game that benefits everyone but them."

Nate leaned in.

"We're done playing. We built something new. A way for books to thrive based on readers, not algorithms or corporate interests."

Liz took a breath.

"This is for the writers who were told they weren't marketable. For the bookstores told what books to buy and fighting to keep their identities, and to survive. Also for the readers who want to discover stories that actually matter to them and their own distinctive tastes, not just what's popular."

The comments exploded.

Viewers poured in.

Their movement was no longer an idea.

It was real.

Now, all they had to do was survive what came next.

J.R. stared at the contract on Clint's desk.

"This is insane," J.R. muttered.

Clint smirked. "Good."

J.R. looked up. "You're talking about rebuilding literary fiction in this market? That's suicide."

Clint leaned forward. "Or it's the one thing that will actually save this industry."

J.R. swallowed.

Because deep down?

He wanted to believe it.

Clint tapped the desk. “We don’t play their game. We create a space where books like yours matter again.”

J.R. ran a hand through his hair.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” he admitted.

Clint’s voice was steady.

“You already are.”

Veronica scrolled through her phone, watching the reactions to Liz and Nathaniel’s launch.

Sebastián sat across from her, calm as ever.

“They’re gaining traction,” Veronica murmured.

Sebastián sipped his whiskey. “Not for long.”

Veronica glanced up. “You have something planned?”

Sebastián smirked.

“You don’t stop a revolution by fighting it.” He set his glass down. “You make the revolution ours.”

Veronica’s eyes gleamed.

“You want to buy them out.”

Sebastián shrugged. “Or bury them. Whichever works first.”

Veronica exhaled.

Liz and Nathaniel thought they were winning.

They had no idea how fast the industry could erase them.

Lena sat across from a group of independent booksellers, their faces uncertain.

“I know this sounds extreme,” she said, keeping her voice steady.

Derek nodded beside her. “But we’re running out of time.”

One bookseller hesitated. “So you’re saying we… cut the Big Five out completely?”

Lena exhaled.

“Yes.”

Silence.

Then, one by one, the booksellers nodded.

Lena’s heart pounded.

They had bookstores.

Now?

They needed books.

Simone stared at her computer screen.

Liz and Nathaniel’s platform was everywhere.

Readers were talking.
Authors were supporting it.

And she?

She was doing nothing.

A knock on her door made her jump.

She opened it to find Julian Raines, leaning casually against the frame.

“You’re avoiding reality,” he said smoothly.

Simone crossed her arms. “I don’t do movements.”

Julian smirked. “You don’t do much of anything these days.”

Her jaw clenched.

Julian’s smirk faded. “This isn’t just about those other authors out there.” He gestured to the screen. “It’s about all of us. If we don’t control our own careers, they will.”

Simone swallowed hard.

Because deep down?

She knew he was right.

Spencer watched engagement numbers climb.

Everett stood beside him, arms crossed.

“They’re making this too easy,” Everett muttered.

Spencer smirked. “Because they think they’re in control.”

Everett tapped the screen.

“The new rating system is live.”

Spencer exhaled.

It wasn’t about stars anymore.

Now?

Books were ranked by reader behavior, discussion trends, and sentiment analysis.

The five-star system had morphed.

And Spencer & Everett?

They controlled what came next.

Chapter 9: The First Crash

Liz refreshed the platform’s dashboard for the fifth time in an hour.

Her stomach dropped.

The numbers weren’t just slowing down—they were disappearing.

“Something’s wrong,” she muttered.

Nate leaned over her shoulder, frowning. “That’s not possible. We had momentum. People were signing up.”

Liz’s phone buzzed.

> Lena Cho: “Your website just got buried. It’s not showing up in searches.”

Liz’s hands tightened into fists.

“They’re trying to erase us.”

Nate exhaled sharply. “We knew this would happen.”

Liz stood up. “Then we hit back harder.”

Nate smirked. “Now you’re speaking my language.”

J.R. sat across from Clint, flipping through his contract.

“This is different,” J.R. muttered.

Clint smirked. “Because it’s real.”

J.R. tapped the paper. “You’re going fully independent? No corporate backing?”

Clint leaned back. “That’s the only way this works. No manipulation. No fake bestsellers. Just good books winning on their own merit.”

J.R. exhaled.

The industry had never worked that way.

And maybe?

That’s why it had never worked for people like him.

He picked up a pen.

And signed.

Veronica stared at the report on her desk.

Liz and Nathaniel’s platform had gained over 100,000 users in 48 hours.

And then?

It had flatlined.

Sebastián sat across from her, completely relaxed.

“We made sure they won’t gain visibility on any major platform,” he said, swirling his whiskey. “Every search, every promotion? Drowned out. We generated more content around what we

wanted people to see. All they're doing is spitting in the wind."

Veronica exhaled.

"They'll fight back."

Sebastián smirked. "Let them."

Veronica leaned forward.

"If they don't disappear, we take them over."

Sebastián nodded. "Exactly."

Because to people like Veronica and Sebastián, in publishing?

It wasn't about winning.

It was about owning the game.

Lena slammed her laptop shut.

"They've buried Liz and Nate's platform," she snapped.

Derek frowned. “They’re that scared?”

Lena nodded. “And now they’ll go after the bookstores.”

Derek exhaled.

Because if bookstores lost faith in indie sales, then everything Lena was building would fall apart.

Derek pulled out his phone.

> To Liz Harper: “We’re still with you. Whatever you need.”

Lena watched him.

“You’re finally picking a side?”

Derek smirked.

“I already picked one.”

Simone sat in her apartment, staring at her dwindling sales.

She had ignored all this drama, exposing oneself to sell a couple of books.

And now?

She was becoming irrelevant in this new technology-driven ‘bookdom'.

Another message popped up.

> Julian Raines: “You can’t just watch this happen. Call me.”

Simone hesitated.

Then, for the first time in months…

She reached for her cell.

Everett watched the latest numbers roll in.

“Elizabeth and Nathaniel’s platform is fading,” he muttered.

Spencer smirked. “Because we control how people find books.”

Everett exhaled. “And Veronica?”

Spencer’s smile widened.

“She thinks she’s winning.”

Everett raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t she?”

Spencer leaned back.

“She’s just playing a different version of the game.”

Everett chuckled. “And we’re playing the real one?”

Spencer’s eyes gleamed.

“We’re making the game.”

Chapter 10: The Counterattack

Liz sat in front of her crashed website, fingers clenched into fists.

“They’re trying to erase us,” she muttered.

Nate leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “No, they’re trying to make us give up.”

Liz exhaled sharply. “Then we don’t.”

She grabbed her phone and started typing.

> To Lena Cho: “We need a direct sales route. Bypass the platforms. Can you do it?”
>
> To J.R. Wolfe: “You still with us?”
>
> To indie authors everywhere: “They want us invisible. Let’s make them see us instead.”

Within minutes, responses started rolling in.

Lena: thumbs up emoji

J.R.: 100%

Authors: stickers of solidarity kept scrolling by

Liz looked at Nate.

“We’re not just building a platform anymore,” she said.

Nate grinned. “No.”

“We’re galvanizing our community.”

J.R. paced Clint’s office, adrenaline surging.

“They’re cutting Liz and Nate off from everything,” he muttered.

Clint smirked. “Of course they are.”

J.R. turned on him. “You’re calm about this?”

Clint leaned back. “Because we saw this coming.”

J.R. nnarrowed his eyes. “And?”

Clint exhaled. “And we aren’t building a system. We’re building a movement.”

J.R. stared at him. “You’re talking about literary fiction like it’s activism.”

Clint smirked. “It is.”

J.R. let out a slow breath.

Maybe Clint was crazy.

Or maybe…

He was the only one who truly understood what was happening.

Veronica sat across from Sebastián, watching industry reports.

Liz and Nate’s site was suffocating under pressure.

But it wasn’t dead yet.

Sebastián sipped his whiskey. “They’re fighting harder than expected.”

Veronica exhaled. “So we make it easier for them to surrender.”

Sebastián raised an eyebrow. “How?”

Veronica’s lips curled.

“We buy them out.”

Sebastián set down his glass. “You think they’d sell?”

Veronica smiled.

“They don’t have to.”

She tapped her phone screen.

> To Spencer Winslow: “I need an acquisition plan. Make them need us.”

Sebastián smirked.

“This is why I like working with you, Veronica.”

She leaned back.

“Of course it is.”

Lena stared at the distribution map, eyes sharp.

“Liz and Nate need sales that bypass traditional platforms,” she said.

Derek nodded. “We route through indie bookstores.”

Lena exhaled. “That’s a lot of stores to organize.”

Derek smirked. “You said you wanted a revolution.”

Lena crossed her arms.

“I didn’t think it would be this big.”

Derek chuckled.

“Well, too late.”

Lena’s phone buzzed.

Elizabeth Harper: “Let’s do this.”

Lena exhaled sharply.

“Then we start today.”

Simone had spent years avoiding this world.

Now?

It was closing in on her anyway.

She sat across from Julian, wine glass untouched.

“They’re rewriting the rules,” she murmured.

Julian nodded. “And you either play or you disappear.”

Simone looked out the window.

She had always hated the idea of chasing visibility.

But if she didn't take control of her career now?

Someone else would.

She turned back to Julian.

"I want in."

Julian grinned.

"Took you long enough."

Spencer and Everett watched the engagement reports roll in.

Elizabeth and Nathaniel's movement?

Growing.

Veronica's corporate push?

Strategic.

Spencer smirked. “They’re playing checkers.”

Everett chuckled. “And we’re playing something else entirely.”

He tapped the screen.

The algorithm adjusted again.

Now?

Publishing wasn’t just about selling books.

It was about controlling discovery itself.

And they?

Were the only ones who understood how to do it.

Chapter 11: The Breaking Point

Liz stared at her screen, heart pounding.

Sales were surging.

Lena’s independent bookstore network had worked.

Readers were buying directly from them, bypassing corporate-controlled platforms.

It wasn’t just a small win.

It was a direct challenge to the system.

> Lena Cho: “We just crossed 50,000 in sales. This is real.”

Liz turned to Nate, barely able to believe it.

“We did it,” she whispered.

Nate grinned. “We’re doing it.”

Then Liz’s phone rang.

An unknown number.

She hesitated, then answered.

A smooth, familiar voice filled the line.

Veronica Westcott.

“You’ve made your point, Liz,” Veronica said, ever composed. “Now let’s talk about how you can actually win.”

Liz’s pulse spiked.

Veronica didn’t make idle calls.

This?

Was an opening move.

J.R. sat across from Clint, staring at two contracts.

One was for Clint’s literary fiction movement. The other?

A counteroffer from Sebastián Locke.

J.R. exhaled. “They want to buy me back in.”

Clint leaned back. “Of course they do.”

J.R. rubbed his temples. “I thought I was done with them.”

Clint’s voice was calm. “Then prove it.”

J.R. swallowed.

Because walking away again?

Meant never coming back.

And if he was wrong?

If the industry still had a place for him…

Could he really afford to let it go?

Veronica sat across from Sebastián, her expression unreadable.

“She won’t go for it,” Sebastián said, swirling his whiskey.

Veronica smirked. “Oh, Sebastián. You think too small.”

Sebastián raised an eyebrow.

Veronica leaned forward. “Liz and Nathaniel don’t just want to sell books. They want to change everything.”

Sebastián exhaled. “And?”

Veronica’s smile widened.

“We offer them something bigger than a fight.”

She tapped her phone.

To Elizabeth Harper: “You’ve proven the system is broken. Let’s build a new one—together.”

Sebastián chuckled. “You really think she’ll bite?”

Veronica’s gaze was steady.

“They always do. They can’t help themselves.”

Lena skimmed through a long list of bookstore orders.

This wasn’t just working.

This was changing everything.

> From Derek Sloan: “They’re coming after us next.”

Lena clenched her jaw.

Because she knew he was right.

If Veronica and Sebastián couldn’t control the movement?

They would destroy it.

And Lena?

Wasn’t about to let that happen.

Simone adjusted her microphone, nerves tight.

She hadn’t done a public appearance in years.

But Julian had convinced her.

“You don’t have to fight,” he had said. “You just have to show up.”

And now?

She was about to speak live to thousands of readers.

The moment the camera light turned on, she inhaled.

And spoke.

“I’ve always believed books should stand on their own. That marketing, algorithms, and trends shouldn’t decide what great literature is. But the truth is… the world doesn’t work that way. And if we don’t fight for books, we lose them.”

The live comments exploded.

Julian watched from the side, smirking.

Simone wasn't just entering the fight.

She was becoming a symbol.

Spencer scrolled through the latest analytics.

Liz and Nathaniel's system was thriving despite being buried.

J.R. was about to make a choice.

Simone had just shifted the conversation.

And Veronica?

Was trying to absorb them.

Everett smirked. "They're all scrambling."

Spencer exhaled. "Because they don't know what we already do."

Everett tapped the screen.

NEW INDUSTRY STANDARD: THE READER ENGAGEMENT INDEX

Books will no longer be ranked by sales or reviews. Instead, they will be judged by reader activity, discussion trends, and predictive engagement modeling.

Spencer leaned back, satisfied.

Veronica thought she was taking control.

Liz thought she was breaking free.

But neither of them realized...

Spencer and Everett had already won. They were taking all the power, influence and fortune acquired with the five star system and now they were going to overshadow and overrun everything anyone else was doing.

Chapter 12: The Deal They Can’t Ignore

Liz read Veronica’s message again.

“You’ve proven the system is broken. Let’s build a new one—together.”

Nate scoffed. “This is classic Westcott.”

Liz exhaled. “She wants us inside the system.”

Nate leaned forward. “No, Liz. She wants to own us.”

Liz hesitated.

Because as much as she hated Veronica’s tactics…

She wasn’t wrong.

Liz and Nate’s platform was working—but barely.

Veronica?

Had the resources to take it global overnight.

The question wasn’t whether they could survive without her.

It was whether they could win without her.

And Liz wasn’t sure of the answer.

J.R. stared at Sebastián Locke’s offer.

A lucrative book deal. Full industry backing. Media push.

Everything he had lost—handed back to him.

If he just signed.

Clint leaned against his desk, arms crossed. “You already know the answer.”

J.R. clenched his jaw. “Do I?”

Clint’s voice was sharp. “Sebastián isn’t saving your career. He’s erasing your rebellion.”

J.R. swallowed.

Because Clint was right.

If he took Sebastián’s deal?

It wouldn’t be his book anymore.

It would be the industry's book.

And he would never get to fight again.

J.R. picked up the contract.

And ripped it in half.

Clint smirked. “Welcome to the hero’s journey.”

Veronica sat across from Sebastián, sipping her wine.

“She hasn’t answered yet,” Veronica mused.

Sebastián smirked. “Because she’s considering it.”

Veronica swirled her glass.

“She thinks she has a choice.”

Sebastián chuckled. “They all do. Right before they lose.”

Veronica exhaled.

If Liz took the deal?

She was absorbed.

If she refused?

She was erased.

Either way?

Veronica and Sebastián still controlled the industry.

Or so they thought.

Lena skimmed the email from the biggest bookstore coalition yet.

“We’re in. Let’s take back distribution.”

She turned to Derek. “This is real.”

Derek exhaled. “Then we better be ready.”

Lena nodded.

Because once they cut publishers out of distribution?

The industry would never be the same.

Simone’s interview had gone viral.

Her words—raw, real, urgent—were being quoted everywhere.

She had never cared about fame.

But this?

This was about books surviving.

Julian grinned. “Told you.”

Simone rolled her eyes. “Don’t make me regret this.”

Julian chuckled. “Too late.”

Because Simone was in the fight now.

And there was no turning back.

Spencer scrolled through the new algorithm reports.

“Liz’s movement is surging,” Everett noted.

Spencer smirked. “For now.”

Everett leaned in. “And when do we pull the trigger?”

Spencer tapped the screen.

“Now.”

With a single command, the industry shifted.

No announcement. No warning.

The Reader Engagement Index became the new standard.

And in that moment?

The entire system belonged to them.

Chapter 13: The Line in the Sand

Liz paced the small office, Veronica's message burning in her mind.

"You've proven the system is broken. Let's build a new one—together."

Nate sat on the desk, watching her.

"This is exactly what she does," he said. "She waits for people to get desperate, then owns them."

Liz exhaled. "But she's offering something real."

Nate crossed his arms. "No. She's offering control."

Liz stopped pacing.

Veronica could fast-track their platform into mainstream success.

She could give them access to the industry's deepest resources.

But at what cost?

Liz picked up her phone.

And typed her response.

> To Veronica Westcott: “I’d rather burn the system down than build it with you.”

Nate grinned. “Now that’s the Liz I know.”

Liz exhaled.

Because there was no turning back now.

Veronica stared at the message from Liz.

Sebastián sat across from her, waiting.

“Well?” he asked.

Veronica’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“She refused.”

Sebastián raised an eyebrow. “Surprising.”

Veronica set her phone down. “Not really.”

Sebastián chuckled. “Then you know what happens next.”

Veronica’s gaze darkened.

“How emotional. It’s time they learn. Publishing is a business. Writers write, publishers publish, everyone wants to be the literary darling all the time. I should know. But it’s an industry based on attention, interests and dare I say it, drama, conflicting appeals. Hell, it’s Survivor for Bookworms.”

Sebastián swirled his whiskey. “Their attempt to defy us.. Let’s make sure they never recover.”

Veronica nodded.

And just like that?

Liz and Nate weren’t just rivals.

They were targets.

J.R. stood with Clint in front of a small crowd of indie authors.

“This isn’t just about our books,” Clint said. “It’s about proving that literary fiction still matters. That readers want something beyond what the market forces on them.”

The authors nodded.

J.R. exhaled.

He had spent years chasing validation from the industry.

Now? Systems were being corrupted, manipulated, abandoned, reimagined and more. New systems, new approaches to reader satisfaction, new faces, old guard, they were all coming out, supposedly in the name of keep literature alive and in the hands of the readers, the mom and pop bookstores, not profit-

churning machines who didn’t care what it was they were selling.

He was helping to build something outside of all of it.

It was terrifying.

But for the first time in a long time?

It felt right. For him, it was about the book, what was in it, the authors' intent. It was about the books dammit.

Lena scanned the final distribution agreements.

“We control this now,” she said, voice steady.

Derek nodded. “No corporate interference?”

Lena smirked. “None.”

They had done it.

The bookstores weren’t just surviving.

They were breaking free.

And if publishers wanted to sell through them?

They’d have to play by Lena’s rules.

For the first time, distribution belonged to the booksellers.

And that?

Changed everything.

Simone scrolled through the social media storm.

Her words from the interview had spread everywhere.

Readers were rallying.

Authors were pushing back against the system.

She looked at Julian.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen,” she muttered.

Julian smirked. “That’s the thing about revolutions, Simone. They don’t wait for permission.”

Simone set down her phone.

For the first time in her career…

She wasn’t watching from the sidelines.

She was part of the book community’s conversations.

Everett scanned the new engagement data.

“Elizabeth and Nathaniel are still gaining traction,” he muttered.

Spencer smirked.

“Not for long.”

He clicked a button.

The final algorithm update rolled out.

From now on?

Book rankings weren’t based on sales or reviews.

They were based on data-driven audience predictions.

Books would now rise before they were even released.

And who controlled that data?

Spencer and Everett.

Everett leaned back.

“They think they’re changing publishing.”

Spencer grinned.

“They don’t realize we already did.”

Chapter 14: The Hardest Fall

Liz woke up to a flood of messages, headlines, and chaos.

Her heart pounded as she scrolled through the alerts.

- “New Allegations Against Liz Harper’s Platform”
- “Self-Publishing Revolution or Dangerous Misinformation?”
- “Elizabeth Harper: Fraud, Failure, or Just Naïve?”

She inhaled sharply.

They had planned for pushback.

But this?

This was a coordinated takedown.

Her phone rang.

Nate.

“Are you seeing this?” she asked the moment she picked up.

Nate’s voice was tense. “Yeah. And it’s worse than you think.”

Liz pulled up her platform dashboard.

And froze.

The website was gone.

A single error message flashed on the screen.

Access revoked.

Liz’s chest tightened. “No. No, no, no.”

Nate’s voice was grim.

“They didn’t just bury us, Liz.” He exhaled.

“They erased us.”

Veronica scrolled through the morning headlines, completely at ease.

Sebastián poured himself a drink.

“They’re in free fall,” he mused. “No website. No media support. No platform.”

Veronica took a sip of coffee. “And just like that, they vanish.”

Sebastián smirked. “We should send them flowers.”

Veronica leaned forward.

“They’re not dead yet.”

Sebastián raised an eyebrow.

Veronica’s gaze darkened.

“We make sure they never recover.”

Sebastián chuckled.

Now?

Now it was time to finish them.

J.R. stormed into Clint’s office, phone in hand.

“They shut down Liz’s platform,” he said, voice tight.

Clint exhaled. “Not surprising.”

J.R. clenched his fists. “We have to do something.”

Clint nodded. “We will.”

J.R. narrowed his eyes. “And what’s that?”

Clint picked up his phone.

> To Lena Cho: “Time to take the bookstores public.”

J.R. blinked. “Wait. You mean—”

Clint smirked.

“We move offline.”

J.R. exhaled.

This was about to get bigger than anyone expected.

Lena's email exploded the moment Clint's message went out.

Derek sat across from her.

"This is huge," she whispered.

Derek nodded. "If we get enough bookstores to back Liz's authors, publishers won't be able to shut them out."

Lena's pulse raced.

They were about to do something no one had ever done.

And if it worked?

It wouldn't just save Liz.

It would redefine publishing forever.

Simone sat across from Julian in his penthouse office, watching the industry burn.

Julian sipped his drink. “They came for Liz faster than I thought.”

Simone exhaled. “And now?”

Julian smirked.

“Now we make them regret it.”

Simone frowned. “How?”

Julian set down his glass.

“By making this personal.”

Simone’s chest tightened.

Because she knew what he meant.

He wasn’t talking about fighting the industry.

He was talking about exposing its leaders.

Simone exhaled.

This was about to get very, very real.

Everett scanned the engagement data.

“Veronica and Sebastián’s attack is working,” he noted.

Spencer nodded. “Good.”

Everett glanced at him. “But Liz’s side isn’t dead yet.”

Spencer smirked.

“They don’t have to die.”

Everett frowned. “Then what’s the move?”

Spencer leaned back.

“We let them fight.”

Everett raised an eyebrow.

Spencer’s grin widened.

“Because no matter who wins?”

He gestured at the data.

“We still control what comes next.”

Everett exhaled.

Because Spencer?

Spencer wasn’t playing a side.

He was playing them all.

Chapter 15: The Battle Turns

Liz sat in front of her blank laptop screen.

Her website? Gone.
Her name? Dragged through every industry hit piece.
Her movement? On the verge of collapse.

She should have felt defeated.

Instead?

She felt furious.

Nate paced beside her. “They want us to disappear.”

Liz’s jaw tightened. “Then we make sure they never forget us.”

Nate exhaled. “And how exactly do we do that?”

Liz’s fingers hovered over the keyboard.

“They control publishing,” she murmured. “But they don’t control the story.”

She typed a single sentence:

“The publishing industry is built on lies, and here’s the proof.”

Nate’s eyes widened.

“We’re going expose them?”

Liz’s expression hardened.

“No.”

She turned the laptop toward him.

“We’re going to burn them down.”

Veronica scrolled through her morning briefing, sipping her espresso.

The reports were exactly what she expected.

✔ Liz and Nate's platform destroyed.

✔ Their movement destabilized.

✔ The media narrative firmly in their control.

Everything was perfect.

Until Sebastián entered the room, expression unreadable.

"We have a problem," he muttered.

Veronica arched a brow. "Impossible."

Sebastián tossed his phone onto the table.

Veronica's stomach dropped as she read the headline:

"How the Publishing Industry Manufactures Success—And Who Profits From It."

It was an anonymous post—detailed, brutal, and dangerously accurate.

Veronica's pulse spiked.

“This isn’t from a random writer,” she murmured.

Sebastián exhaled sharply. “No.” He met her gaze.

“This is from someone on the inside.”

J.R. sat across from Clint, watching as the article spread like wildfire.

“You did this,” J.R. muttered.

Clint smirked. “I enabled it.”

J.R. leaned forward. “That post named names, Clint.”

Clint’s gaze darkened.

“The industry has been rigged. And now?” He gestured to the screen.

“Now, readers know it, too.”

J.R. exhaled.

For the first time, it wasn’t just authors fighting back.

It was the people buying the books.

And that?

Was unstoppable.

Lena stood in front of a crowd of independent bookstore owners.

The air was electric.

“This isn’t just about selling books anymore,” she said. “This is about who gets to decide what readers find.”

Derek nodded. “For years, publishers dictated what bookstores carried. But now?” He scanned the room.

“You have the power to decide for yourselves.”

Silence.

Then, slowly—one by one—every bookseller in the room nodded.

Lena’s chest tightened with hope.

Because this wasn’t just a rebellion.

This was a new era.

Simone refreshed her social media feed.

Her hands shook.

The article had dropped.

And people?

Were angry.

Not at her.

At the system.

Julian smirked beside her. “Told you.”

Simone exhaled. “We just started a war, Julian.”

He raised his glass.

“Then let’s win it.”

Everett scrolled through the new analytics.

“The article’s traction is insane,” he muttered.

Spencer tapped his fingers against the desk.

“This changes things.”

Everett frowned. “Do we intervene?”

Spencer smirked.

“No.”

Everett raised an eyebrow. “No?”

Spencer leaned back.

“We let them tear each other apart.”

Because when the dust settled?

Spencer and Everett would still be standing.

And the industry?

Would belong to them.

Chapter 16: The Breaking Point

Liz refreshed her inbox, her pulse hammering.

The article had exploded.

Readers were outraged.
Authors were rallying.
The industry was on fire.

And yet…

Nothing from Veronica.

Nothing from Sebastián.

Nate tapped his fingers against the table.

“This is bad.”

Liz frowned. “You mean for them?”

Nate shook his head. “No. For us.”

Liz’s stomach twisted.

Because Nate was right.

Veronica and Sebastián weren’t losing.

They were planning.

And whatever came next?

Would be worse than anything before.

Sebastián set down his whiskey glass, eyes cold.

“This isn’t just a rebellion anymore,” he muttered. “This is an uprising.”

Veronica crossed her arms.

“They think they’re heroes.”

Sebastián exhaled sharply. “So let’s remind them they’re nothing.”

Veronica’s lips curled into a smirk.

She picked up her phone and typed a single message.

To Spencer Winslow: “Shut them down. Completely.”

Sebastián arched a brow. “You trust him?”

Veronica sipped her wine.

“No.”

She leaned forward.

“But I trust that he wants to win.”

Sebastián chuckled.

“Then let’s end this.”

J.R. leaned against Clint’s desk, watching the latest industry response.

Silence.

No denials.
No counterattacks.

Just quiet.

“This isn’t good,” J.R. muttered.

Clint exhaled. “No. It means they’re about to retaliate.”

J.R. ran a hand through his hair.

“We need to move faster.”

Clint nodded.

> To Lena Cho: “Launch now. We don’t wait.”

J.R. clenched his jaw.

Because once this started?

There was no going back.

Lena stood in front of a massive screen, watching real-time preorders spike.

The bookstore network? Fully operational.
The Top Five? Locked out.

They had done it.

Derek crossed his arms. “It’s working.”

Lena nodded. “Now we wait for their counterpunch.”

Her phone buzzed.

She glanced at the message.

And her heart dropped.

> From J.R.: “They’re moving. We need to be ready.”

Derek exhaled.

Because the real fight?

Was about to begin.

Simone scrolled through her mentions.

Her interview was still spreading.

Readers were furious.

Authors were choosing sides.

And the industry?

Was splintering.

Julian sat beside her, casual as ever.

“Enjoying the chaos?” he mused.

Simone exhaled.

“I didn’t expect it to move this fast.”

Julian smirked.

“Revolutions never do.”

She met his gaze.

“Then we’d better finish it.”

Julian raised his glass.

“Now you’re thinking like a winner.”

“I want my peace back.”

Spencer stared at Veronica's message.

"Shut them down. Completely."

Everett leaned over. "Are we doing this?"

Spencer tapped his fingers against the desk.

"This is what we wanted."

Everett frowned. "No. This is what she wants."

Spencer smirked.

"Then let's make sure we control the outcome."

He clicked a button.

And in an instant?

Everything changed.

Chapter 17: The Final Betrayal

Liz refreshed the dashboard.

Nothing.

No sales.
No traffic.
No visibility.

Nate clenched his jaw. “This isn’t just a takedown. This is a blackout.”

Liz’s stomach twisted.

Then her phone buzzed.

> From Spencer Winslow: “Walk away. You can’t win.”

Nate read over her shoulder.

His expression hardened.

“They bought him.”

Liz exhaled sharply.

“We never had him.”

Nate stood. “So what do we do?”

Liz looked at him, heart pounding.

“We finish this.”

Veronica leaned back in her chair, watching the data refresh.

Liz and Nate’s movement?

Vanished.

Sebastián smirked. “That’s how you end a rebellion.”

Veronica sipped her wine.

“They thought they could change the system.”

Sebastián chuckled. “They forgot who owns it.”

Veronica set down her glass.

“They’re done.”

Sebastián exhaled. “And the rest?”

Veronica smirked.

“They’ll fall in line.”

Because they always did.

Until someone didn’t.

J.R. ran a hand through his hair, staring at the breaking news.

“Liz’s platform is gone.”

Clint nodded. “We knew they’d move.”

J.R. exhaled. “We should’ve stopped it.”

Clint smirked.

“No, we needed to prepare for it.”

He turned his laptop toward J.R.

And what J.R. saw?

Changed everything.

Lena’s phone blew up.

> From bookstore owners: “What do we do now?”

She turned to Derek, pulse racing.

“They just erased Liz.”

Derek exhaled.

“Then it’s time for our move.”

Lena picked up her phone.

And called every independent bookstore left standing.

Because if the industry wanted to erase authors?

Then readers would rebuild them.

Simone stood next to Julian, staring at the article draft.

“This will burn everything,” she murmured.

Julian smirked.

“Exactly.”

Simone’s fingers trembled.

But she hit publish.

Because now?

It wasn’t about protecting careers.

It was about getting the lies out of the way.

Spencer scrolled through the final engagement report.

Everett crossed his arms. “Veronica thinks she won.”

Spencer smirked.

“She doesn’t realize she played into our hands.”

Everett frowned. “Explain.”

Spencer tapped the screen.

“Everyone thinks they’re winning the war.”

Everett’s eyes widened.

Spencer leaned back.

“We are the entire battlefield.”

Chapter 18: The Fall and the Future

Liz's fingers hovered over the livestream button, the weight of the past few months pressing down on her. She and Nate had started this movement with nothing but an idea—an idea that had cost them everything. Their platform was gone. Their reputations obliterated. The industry had rewritten their story before they could finish telling it.

But they had one thing left.

The truth.

Nate stood beside her, watching as the viewer count climbed before they even started speaking. There was a hunger in the air, a desperation in the comments that poured in.

Readers.

Writers.

Editors.

Booksellers.

The forgotten and frustrated voices of publishing were waiting.

Liz took a steadying breath and clicked LIVE.

The camera framed her and Nate in a dimly lit office space—the only safe place they had left. No studio setup. No polish. Just two people ready to lay it all out.

Liz Harper: “They took everything from us. Our platform, our careers, our names. They did it because we told you the truth—because we proved they were lying. But here’s the thing about truth: you can’t erase it.”

Nate leaned forward, his voice sharp.

“For decades, a handful of people have controlled what you read. They decide which stories are ‘worthy.’ They manipulate rankings.

They silence the books they don’t want you to see. And they profit while authors struggle to survive.”

Liz met the camera’s gaze.

“We’re done playing by their rules. If they won’t let us exist in their industry, then we’ll build our own. But we’re not doing it alone.”

A notification popped up.

> Lena Cho: “The bookstores are ready.”
> J.R. Wolfe: “Check your email. We’re making our move.”
> Anonymous: “The exposé drops in ten minutes.”

Nate read over her shoulder, then looked at her.

Liz’s grip on the desk tightened.

“This isn’t just a rebellion anymore.”

Nate’s lips curled into a grin. “No.”

“This is a revolution.”

Veronica Westcott was not accustomed to losing.

She sat in her office, perfectly composed as she read the breaking news. The article was everywhere now, unstoppable, its damning words exposing the calculated lies that had held up the industry for decades. The names were there, in bold type—hers, Sebastián’s, Spencer’s.

She sipped her wine slowly, setting the glass down with precision.

“They think this changes anything?” she murmured.

Sebastián was less composed. He slammed his glass onto the desk. “We should have taken them out earlier.”

Veronica exhaled. “No. We let them believe they were winning.”

Sebastián’s jaw tightened. “And now?”

Veronica glanced at her phone.

> To Spencer Winslow: “Shut them down. Completely.”

She met Sebastián’s gaze.

> “Now, we remind everyone what happens when they challenge us.”

J.R. sat across from Clint, watching the industry burn.

For the first time in years, publishing wasn’t just an exclusive club—it was a battlefield.

Clint slid a document across the desk. “The bookstores are in. The indie authors are in. The readers are in.”

J.R. hesitated, staring at the contract.

“This is insane,” he muttered.

Clint smirked. “That’s the point.”

J.R. picked up the pen and signed.

Lena ran a hand through her hair, watching as thousands of orders flooded into the indie bookstore system.

Derek stood beside her, scanning the numbers.

“This isn’t just a shift,” he murmured. “This is control.”

Lena exhaled. “And we’re never giving it back.”

Because for the first time?

Publishing wasn’t about the gatekeepers.

It was about people.

Simone scrolled through her notifications. Her words had ignited something.

For years, she had hidden from the industry, preferring to write in solitude.

Now?

She had helped end the lie.

Julian smirked beside her. “Regrets?”

She set down her phone.

“Not a single one. For now.”

Everett studied the engagement reports.

“This isn’t looking good for Veronica,” he said.

Spencer steepled his fingers.

“She still thinks she’s in control.”

Everett frowned. “Isn’t she?”

Spencer smirked.

“No.”

Because when this was over?

No one would trust gatekeepers again.

And the ones who controlled the algorithms?

Would control everything.

Epilogue: The Future Belongs to the Storytellers

Six months later.

The publishing industry was unrecognizable.

- ✔ The five-star system in publishing was unrecognizable.
- ✔ Bookstores dictated what readers saw—not algorithms.
- ✔ Self-published and traditionally published books were finally seen as having a fighting chance, even if they weren't algorithm-friendly.

Liz sat at a café, laptop open, watching her new platform grow.

Nate placed a coffee beside her.

"They're calling it 'the great reset.'"

Liz smirked. "Fitting."

Nate leaned back in his chair. “So, what do we call this new era?”

Liz looked at Lena’s bustling bookstore across the street, filled with stories that were never supposed to survive.

Then, she smiled.

“Whatever we want.”

Because for the first time in decades…

Publishing belonged to the storytellers.

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About Em Green

Em Green writes unconventional, human-centered stories that blur the lines between cultures, identities, and genres. She's just as comfortable unraveling mysteries on Seoul's side streets as she is diving deep into the tangled emotions of people who don't fit in neat categories. Her writing invites readers to slow down, stay curious, and embrace the unexpected connections that form when romance, suspense, and self-discovery collide.

With a storyteller's instinct and a traveler's heart, Em bridges the gap between generations—remembering a time before the internet while thriving in a world that lives online. Her works aren't just stories; they're conversations. Conversations with readers who are tired of hype that feels hollow, and are ready for hype that means something. Every

page is a quiet rebellion against the predictable, daring readers to feel more, wonder more, and look beyond what’s in front of them.